

Augustine on St Crispina:

Comparing Augustine's Image of the Saint with Her *Acta*

Jonathan Farrugia (ORCID: 0000-0002-3067-2102)

Publication details: This paper was published in:

André P. De Battista, Jonathan Farrugia and Hector Scerri, eds., *Non Laborat Qui Amat. (Io. eu. tr. 48, 1)*. A Festschrift in honour of Professor Salvino Caruana O.S.A. on his 70th birthday (Malta: Maltese Augustinian Province, 2020), 135-144.

ABSTRACT

Martyrs are discussed by Augustine of Hippo in a good number of his many texts which have survived. In most cases he speaks of males, but occasionally he also presents females as models, amongst whom there is mention of an early fourth century North African martyr named Crispina. Augustine speaks of her twice in his *Exposition on the Psalms*. Crispina, however, is not known only thanks to Augustine, but also thanks to a version of the acts of her martyrdom that has also been conserved. The information given in these two sources is, nonetheless, largely dissimilar, proving that Augustine was aware of a completely different tradition concerning this martyr. This study seeks to compare and contrast these sources, pointing out and explaining, where possible, the major differences.

Jonathan Farrugia

Department of Church History, Patrology and Palaeochristian Archaeology

Faculty of Theology

University of Malta

jonathan.farrugia@um.edu.mt

Augustine on St Crispina: Comparing Augustine's Image of the Saint with Her *Acta*

Jonathan Farrugia

The bishop of Hippo is not generally regarded as a hagiographer in the strict sense of the word; he did, however, have much to say on several saints, especially martyrs, in his sermons.¹ The people he talks about come from all walks of life: men and women, bishops, deacons and lay people. Some of their names are well known: Peter and Paul, John the Baptist, Stephen, Lawrence, Perpetua and Felicitas, Cyprian; others known less: Fructuosus, Augurius and Eulogius, Vincentius, Marianus and Jacobus, Castus and Aemilius, Protasius and Gervasus, Guddenus, Quadratus, Eulalia, Primus, Victoria and Perpetua. Others still are given group-names since they were martyred together or because they form part of a well-known group: the Maccabean martyrs, the Scillitan martyrs, the martyrs of Massa Candida, the Twenty martyrs and the martyrs of Marseilles. In most of the cases, Augustine presents the heroism of the martyrs accepting death for their faith in opposition to the Donatist fanatics who kill themselves in honour of their faith.

The martyrs are honoured by Augustine for wishing what is good and because they refuse to choose short-term goods rather than the eternal good, hence they prefer to accept death and live forever rather

¹ Out of 430 known sermons, about 110 deal with saints (*Sermones* 273-340A).

than choose life and be damned for eternity.² Quoting the letter of James,³ Augustine calls martyrs the most authentic and perfect lovers of justice, and praises the power of their love for justice, their desire for ascent and their going beyond themselves by dying in order to meet God.⁴ While they are suffering in the eyes of people, they are in truth tormenting the devil with their endurance!⁵

While being very careful in his explanation on how martyrs are venerated and not adored by Christians,⁶ upon his return to North

² Travis Ables, "The crown of justice: the death of the martyr and the death of Christ in Augustine's theology of redemption" (Unpublished paper presented at the North American Patristics Society annual meeting, May 2016).

³ "My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing." (Jm 1, 2-4).

⁴ "Millia martyrum adiacent oculis nostris, ipsi veri amatores perfectique iustitiae. [...] O amare, o ire, o sibi perire, o ad Deum pervenire!" (s. 159, 8).

⁵ Speaking of the martyr Vincentius who was being tortured without pity for keeping to his convictions, Augustine has to add: "Denique magis diabolus non victo Vincentio, quam Vincentius persequente diabolo torquebatur." (s. 275, 2).

⁶ An excellent example of this can be seen in his dialogue with the Manichaean bishop Faustus:

"As to our paying honour to the memory of the martyrs, and the accusation of Faustus, that we worship them instead of idols, I should not care to answer such a charge, were it not for the sake of showing how Faustus, in his desire to cast reproach on us, has overstepped the Manichaean inventions, and has fallen heedlessly into a popular notion found in pagan poetry, although he is so anxious to be distinguished from the pagans. For in saying that we have turned the idols into martyrs, he speaks of our worshipping them with similar rites, and appeasing the shades of the departed with wine and food. [...] It is true that Christians pay religious honour to the memory of the martyrs, both to excite us to imitate them and to obtain a share in their merits, and the assistance of their prayers. But we build altars not to any martyr, but to the God of martyrs, although it is to the memory of the martyrs. No one officiating at the altar in the saints' burying-place ever says, 'We bring an offering to you, O Peter! or O Paul! or O Cyprian!' The offering is made to God, who gave the crown of martyrdom, while it is in memory of those thus crowned. [...] What is properly divine worship, which the Greeks call 'latria,' and for which there is no word in Latin, both in doctrine and in practice, we give only to God. To this worship belongs the offering of sacrifices; as we see in the word 'idolatry,' which means the giving of this worship to idols. Accordingly we never offer, or require any one to offer, sacrifice to a martyr, or to a holy soul, or to any angel." (c. *Faust.*, 20, 21.) Translated by Richard Stothert in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, Vol. 4., ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo, New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887), 261-262.

Africa Augustine understood the importance of having a healthy cult of martyrs addressed in the right direction in order to distance himself and his flock from the excesses of the Donatists. In his theology of martyrdom, the bishop of Hippo insisted more on the grace bestowed on these heroes to help them overcome the fear of death, rather than on the quasi superhuman, if not also, insane audacity to go in search of death as the Donatist martyrs did.⁷

Augustine, however, does not preach on martyrs only in his sermons! A curious case is that of St Crispina, a North African martyr who was executed early in the fourth century, of whom Augustine speaks at least twice in his *Expositions on the Psalms*. These expositions know their origin in sermons he delivered to his audience commenting verses from the psalms. Crispina is mentioned several times in two of these: the exposition on psalm 120 and that on psalm 137; these happened to be preached on her feast day which falls on 5 December. Apart from these two cases, Augustine mentions her in two sermons in honour of other saints: sermon 286 (in honour of the martyrs Protasius and Gervasus), and in sermon 313H (in honour of Saint Eulalia). One wonders why Augustine dedicated whole sermons to so many other saints on their feast-days, but limited himself to speak on Crispina only while commenting on the Psalms in sermons that happened to fall on her *dies natalis*. The reason could be very simple: the martyred saint was a North African, therefore most probably Augustine's audience knew her well, as opposed to other saints from foreign countries,⁸ so there would have presumably been no need for the preacher to delve too deep into her story.⁹

There exists a Latin account of Crispina's interrogation,¹⁰ which most probably comes from the fourth century, presumably written

⁷ We can see an example of this in s. 299, 8 where martyrs are praised because through Christ they bravely accept what is indeed very hard, namely giving up their lives.

⁸ Fructuosus, Augurius and Eulogius hailed from Tarragona, Protasius and Gervasus were from Milan; Vincentius was from Saragossa while Eulalia was from Mérida. With these we may add the martyrs of Marseilles and the Maccabean martyrs.

⁹ We have to point out, however, that a number of the main characters in his sermons were actually Africans: Cyprian, Perpetua and Felicitas, Castus and Aemilius, Marianus and Jacobus, Quadratus, Primus, Victoria and Perpetua, along with the Scillitan Martyrs and the martyrs of Massa Candida.

¹⁰ The earliest printed editions, the first in 1723 and the second in 1859 call it *Acta Sanctae Crispinae martyris*; however, in the critical edition published in 1902, for some reason, it is entitled *Passio Sanctae Crispinae*.

very close to the time when the event of her martyrdom took place. In modern editions it has been called *acta* and *passio*, however the style of the text follows strictly the pattern of the *acta*, where hardly any details are given regarding the life of the protagonist, but focus only on the interrogation the saint has to endure before being executed. This gives further weight to the presumed authenticity of the text and its proximity to the actual events. Apart from this, the total lack of wondrous details and fantastic accounts in the text is a further proof that it was not composed in later centuries when the accounts of martyrs became the equivalent of modern fantasy novels.

In this short study I will try to compare the details given by Augustine in his four references to the saint with the scant details about her that we find in the account of her interrogation.

Crispina according to her *Acta*

A posthumous single-volume publication of the collections of antique texts made by Jean Mabillon during his lifetime contains the first known edition of the *acta* of St Crispina.¹¹ The source was a manuscript from the monastery of St Theodoricus in Rheims. Some years later St Alphonsus Liguori published an Italian version of these *acta* in his book *Vittorie dei martiri* completed in September 1775.¹² In 1859, Theodoricus Ruinart discovered another manuscript in the same library and he did his best to put together the information given in both manuscripts;¹³ the result was not any better than the first, because in the compilation of the two manuscripts the editor made many mistakes.¹⁴ The edition published in 1902 included details from the manuscript found in the Grand Seminary of Autun, which, amongst other elucidating particulars, confirmed the date of the martyrdom with the words “*Diocletiano novies et Maximiano Augusto [octies] consulibus,*” pointing to the year 304 which seems to have been the worst one during the persecution in Africa.

¹¹ Jean Mabillon, *Vetera Analecta* (Paris: Montalant, 1723), 177-178.

¹² Théodule Rey-Mermet, *Il santo del secolo dei lumi: Alfonso de' Liguori (1696-1787)* (Roma: Città Nuova, 1990), 780.

¹³ Theodoricus Ruinart, *Acta martyrum sincera* (Ratisbonae: J. Manz, 1859), 477-479.

¹⁴ Pio Franchi dei' Cavalieri, *Nuovi testi agiografici* (Roma: Tipografia Vaticana, 1902), 23.

According to the manuscripts, Crispina is said to have been executed by order of the proconsul Anulinus in Tebessa (“*in coliniam Thebestinam*”), a city in Numidia, but she was originally from Thagura, as the *acta* state (“*Crispina Thagorensis*”). The version of the *acta* that has survived most probably contains a significant lacuna at the beginning, because the usual questions asked by the proconsul, concerning the name, the status and the provenance of the accused are missing. Presumably the interrogation recorded in these *acta* was preceded by others where these clarifications were made; these might have taken place in Thagura before Crispina was sent to the proconsul in Tebessa for final judgment.

Her *acta* start with her being summoned in front of Anulinus, accused of ignoring the Roman laws, namely to offer sacrifices to the gods “*pro salute principum*.” Then the interrogation ensues, which gives practically no details about the saint except from what can be elicited from her behaviour. As expected, the protagonist is clearly presented as a defiant repudiator of paganism. She displays an obstinate ignorance of the Roman religious laws; here, Crispina is most definitely lying since it is not possible that anyone in Roman Africa had no idea of such laws, even those who were born in Christian families, as she seems to imply during her trial.¹⁵

She is described as “*dura et contemptrix*”¹⁶ by the proconsul Anulinus who also accuses her that “*vanitas est animi tui*.”¹⁷ The negative qualities of the Christian woman given by the pagans have the opposite effect on anyone reading her story: if she is hard-headed and despises idols, then she is a faithful worshipper of the true God; if her spirit is proud facing idol-worship, then she is humble in front of God. Due to her hard-headedness, Anulinus threatens to have her hair shorn so that her face would be the first to suffer humiliation.¹⁸

Finally, when Crispina staunchly holds her ground, repeating over and over again that she adores only the true God who sent his Son on earth to save mankind, she is condemned to death by beheading, and

¹⁵ “Hoc non feci aliquando ex quo nata sum” (*Passio S. Crispinae*, 33). This however might refer to her birth to new life through baptism; the text is not clear.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ “... ad omnem deformationem deducta, a novacula ablati crinibus decalvetur, ut eius primum facies ad ignominiam deveniat” (*Ibid.*, 34).

she thanks God for delivering her from Anulinus' hands. She makes the sign of the cross on her forehead, extends her head and is beheaded.

Crispina according to Augustine

The bishop of Hippo's four references to this saint, surprisingly, give us more significant details about her. As we said, the expositions on psalms 120 and 137 were preached on St Crispina's feast, and even though she is not exactly the subject matter of the sermons, he does allude to her qualities and her feast along each of these discourses.

In *en Ps.* 120 Crispina's story is mentioned only towards the end. While discussing verses 5-7 of this psalm¹⁹ Augustine speaks of how God protects his chosen's "*anima*," explaining that although the martyrs suffered in their bodies, God kept their souls under his guard, hence giving them power to endure all torture. And here he brings the example of Crispina:

The persecutors raged against Crispina, whose birthday we are today celebrating; they were raging against a rich and delicate woman: but she was strong, for the Lord was her defence upon the hand of her right hand. He was her Keeper. Is there any one in Africa, my brethren, who knows her not? For she was most illustrious, noble in birth, abounding in wealth: but all these things were in her left hand, beneath her head. An enemy advanced to strike her head, and the left hand was presented to him, which was under her head. Her head was above, the right hand embraced her from above. What could the persecutor do to her, despite her being a delicate woman? In truth she was a fragile woman due to her sex, and perhaps even more weakened by her wealth and the refined way of life to which she was accustomed.²⁰

¹⁹ Dominus custodit te; Dominus protectio tua super manum dexteram tuam. / Per diem sol non uret te, neque luna per noctem. / Dominus custodit te ab omni malo; custodiat animam tuam Dominus (Ps 120: 5-7). The version Augustine was using was most probably the Vulgate, Jerome's translation which was completed toward 405.

²⁰ Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 120, 13. Translated by J.E. Tweed. From *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, Vol. 8, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo, New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1888), 593. The final part, which is missing in the English translation, is my personal translation.

Towards the very end, in the concluding part of the sermon, Augustine once again makes reference to the saint in question, saying that his homily for such a short psalm was quite long, and thus inviting his audience to inebriate themselves with God's word in order to approach with greater joy the tombs of the martyrs.²¹

A complementary picture, giving somewhat more details regarding the scene of the martyrdom is given in the exposition on Psalm 137, when discussing the second part of the first verse:²²

The wicked rejoices in his tavern, the martyr in his chain. In what did that holy Crispina rejoice, whose festival is kept today? She rejoiced when she was being seized, when she was being carried before the judge, when she was being put into prison, when she was being brought forth bound, when she was being lifted up on the scaffold, when she was being heard, when she was being condemned: in all these things she rejoiced; and the wretches thought her wretched, when she was rejoicing before the Angels.²³

Half way through his sermon Augustine once again refers to Crispina, but without mentioning her name, discusses her choice to follow Christ, even by abandoning her children, which in a way was perceived as irresponsible by the onlookers:

Learn what should be sought; meditate on what we are celebrating today. We are celebrating the birthday of a holy and happy woman, and it might be the case that your heart desired earthly happiness. She, burning with holy desire, renounced the earthly happiness that she possessed; she abandoned her children crying in pain for the destiny of their mother. Her behaviour may be deemed in some way as cruel because, while she ran toward the heavenly crown, she gave the impression that she lost all human compassion. Do you think she

²¹ *Etsi brevis Psalmus est, longa tamen tractatio, et longus sermo. Putate, fratres, quia per natalem beatae Crispinae invitavi vos, et immoderatiores fui in convivio producendo. Nonne posset hoc vobis fieri, si quis vos militaris invitaret, et ad mensam sine mensura bibere cogeret? Liceat nobis hoc facere in divino sermone, ut inebriemini et satiemini, quemadmodum et Dominus pluvia sua temporali dignatus est terram irrigare, ut cum maiore gaudio nos sineret ire ad locum martyrum, sicut hesterno die promiseramus. Illi enim martyres sine labore hic sunt nobiscum* (*en. Ps. 120, 15*). Latin citations from Augustine are taken from <http://www.augustinus.it>.

²² "In conspectu angelorum psallam tibi" (Ps 137: 1b).

²³ Tweed, 633.

did not know what she had to desire and what she had to step upon? Certainly not! She knows how to sing praises in front of the angels of God and to desire their company, their holy and pure friendship, where, once she has entered, she would never have to die again, where she would meet the judge in front of whom no deceptiveness has any effect.²⁴

Further down in the same homily, discussing various interpretations of verse 7,²⁵ and bringing to the forefront similar examples referring to God's right and left hand as in the previous psalm discussed, the bishop goes on to say:

Think of Crispina: she was killed, but should we say that God abandoned her because of this? He did not save her through his left hand, but he did this through his right. Think of the Maccabees: many were the torments they had to endure! The opposite was the case of the three young men who praised God while walking in the flames. The salvation of the former was through God's right hand, that of the latter was through his left. From this we understand that God sometimes saves his saints through his left hand, but he always saves them through his right. We can say the opposite about sinners: many times, God saves them through his left hand, but not through his right. Thus was the case with the persecutors of Crispina: they were certainly in good bodily health and, while she was killed, they continued to live. The salvation of these was through the left, while she was preserved in the right. "Your right hand has saved me."²⁶

Towards the end of the same sermon, Augustine mentions what it was that Crispina desired:

Consider the holy martyr Crispina: had she desired the "*diem hominis*" she would have rejected Christ: she would have lived longer down here but she would not live for ever. Rather, she preferred to live for ever rather than live a bit longer in time. Truly, your mercy, Lord, lasts forever. For this I do not want to be set free for some days. Eternal is your mercy with which you set the martyrs free, even though you took them early from this present life. Lord, your mercy lasts for ever.²⁷

²⁴ *en. Ps. 137, 7* (Author's translation).

²⁵ "et super iram inimicorum meorum extendisti manum tuam, et salvum me fecit dextera tua" (Ps 137: 7b).

²⁶ *en. Ps. 137, 14* (Author's translation).

²⁷ *en. Ps. 137, 17* (Author's translation).

Moving on to the hagiographical sermons, as we said, none of those that have reached us are dedicated to Crispina, but Augustine does mention her scantily in a couple of them.

In sermon 286, in honour of saints Protasius and Gervasus, Augustine compares the apostle Peter prior to Jesus' death and resurrection to various saints, amongst whom he mentions Crispina, and concludes that Peter, at this stage of his life, was of an inferior integrity than all of these. Even the female fragility of Crispina and Agnes was superior to his faith (or lack thereof).²⁸

In the homily in honour of Saint Eulalia (313H), Augustine specifies that the words of Christ "Indeed, an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God" does not refer to martyrs like Eulalia, Crispina, Cyprian and many others, because their executioners sought to praise idols, not God, by killing Christians.²⁹

The information Augustine gives about the saint is remarkable: apart from telling us she was a well-known figure in North Africa, we understand from his words that she was a rich and refined woman, hailing from a noble family and also that she had children. Her strength is underlined when Augustine comments that the weakness coming from her sex and from the comfort to which she was accustomed in no way let the enemy overpower her. Despite her female fragility she was strong because she benefited from God's protection. She is presented as going happily to her martyrdom, considering herself lucky rather than wretched (as the onlookers believed she was!). Nothing could stop her from following her divine spouse, not even her crying children.

Conclusion

It is absolutely clear that any information we get of Crispina's background, social status and standing does not come from the version of her *acta* we possess, but from Augustine's details in his sermons. From Augustine we know that she was rich, noble and a mother. No reference is made to any of these in the *acta*. The information the *acta* give, which is not given by Augustine, concerns the name of the proconsul and the year in which the trial took place, and also that

²⁸ s. 286, 2.

²⁹ s. 313H, 3.

Crispina was most probably born in a Christian family, not a convert. The bishop of Hippo also gives colourful descriptions, albeit short, of the saint appearing more than once in front of magistrates, ascending the accused's stage in fetters of iron.

The only point on which Augustine and the *acta* seem to converge is in the depiction of the saint going happily (or simply voluntarily) to her death. Otherwise, reading the *acta* by themselves, one may easily conclude that Crispina was a common Christian, hailing from humble origins and most probably a virgin, since Anulinus in his questions never makes reference to her motherhood or to her high lineage.

I believe that asking whether Augustine had in hand these *acta* while preparing his sermons is uncalled for. He definitely knew much more about Crispina than the *acta* reveal; this might mean that he either knew her story very well, which is very possible since she was a "local" saint, or else that – more conceivably – there was in circulation another, longer, version of her martyrdom and this was what he actually had at his disposition. This other text could either have been another form of the *acta*, but with a prologue that was quite long, giving details on the events of Crispina's life from the moment of her accusation and arrest, as most other *acta* do; or else it could have been a fully-fledged *passio*. If what Augustine used as his source was the latter, he certainly filtered out any fantastic details that are usually found in *passiones*.

In conclusion we can say that it is very difficult for us today to appreciate the quantity of versions of martyrial texts that were in circulation in Late Antiquity because virtually unknown saints could have had many versions of their stories readily available for readers. Augustine's depiction of Crispina is but one faint example: we possess nowadays a version of her martyrdom that he possibly had no idea of, while he had in hand another version which is nowadays lost.